

# WSF as “alter-globalisation” \* space

It is ironic that neo-liberal globalisation, that phenomenon internationalising a free market ideology and wreaking devastating effects to the majority of the world's peoples, can be the harbinger of such an expression of global solidarity as embodied in the World Social Forum.<sup>1</sup> Some say that resistance to neoliberalist economic policies and globalisation started to grow in the middle of 1990s when peoples across geographical, racial, ethnic and sexual lines of oppressive divisions recognised the face of their common enemy. The massive Seattle protests in 1992 that led to the deadlock in the WTO negotiations, the Beijing World Conference of Women in 1995, the formations of tactical regional and international networks to confront and subvert other global governance bodies and influential corporate cartels—all these initiatives point to the mounting protest on a new, synchronised global level.

Some say, however, that it started way before that. Mario Osava of Inter-Press Service calls the WSF “a child of 1968.” In the 1960s, he recalls, the people's struggles all over the world occurred in parallel but often mutually exclusive ways. The activists of the 1960s trudged on different roads—for national liberation in many Latin American and Asian countries, for the recognition of civil rights for African-Americans in the United States, for democracy, women's liberation, or indigenous rights worldwide. The concept of diversity began to gain currency as a universal value with its “respect for differences, opposition to the conformity of industrial society and to the reduction of variety, whether natural or cultural.” Consequently, he noted, the progressive forces were dispersed into separate movements with specific advocacies, as reflected in the NGO boom in the 1970s. “With the World Social Forum, it seems that cycle is ending and a process of convergence is getting underway.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever is the exact origin of this worldwide counter-phenomenon to globalisation, it found its most epochal expression through the WSF.

Initiated by a core group of grassroots activists from Brazil and France, the WSF is “a space for discussing alternatives, for exchanging experiences and for strengthening alliances between social movements, unions of the working people and NGOs.” With the vision that “Another World Is Possible,” WSF evolved as an answer to the snowballing international movement against capitalist-led globalisation. It was a historic event, auspicious even, since it “sprang from global activism on behalf of huge grassroots constituencies.”<sup>3</sup> Initially held to challenge the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2001, participation ballooned from around 20,000 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where it has been held yearly since 2001, to 150,000 during the 4th WSF in India in 2004. This increase could be considered a testimony to the dynamism of traditional activist movements and culture toward more change, innovation, openness and creativity.

*alterglobalisation* - the name given to social movements that support the international integration of globalisation but demands that values of democracy, economic justice, environmental protection and human rights be put ahead of purely economic concerns.

— [www.informationgenius.com/encyclopedia/a/al/alterglobalization.html](http://www.informationgenius.com/encyclopedia/a/al/alterglobalization.html)

While this new global resistance space that is the WSF also creates new problematiques and tensions owing to the diversity of frameworks and contexts among the gathered organisations, many remain hopeful. “The aim is never to come to some final agreement, rather to

arrive at moments of consensus for particular actions and projects, and to clarify perspectives and visions strengthening the reality of a new transformative subjectivity,” suggests a paper by Transform!-Europe.

“Any risk... is best avoided by remaining firm in our beliefs: in the deep crisis of the present economic and political system which, if not challenged, could produce a crisis of civilisation; in the radically new character of subjects of social transformation that are emerging to challenge the irrationality of the ruling order; in the impossibility of this new antagonistic subjectivity emerging and constituting itself through the existing political institutions; and finally, in the ability of these new movements to constantly renew themselves through struggle and conflict and in the process, to create new social and political relationships.”<sup>4</sup>





# The Four Themes<sup>16</sup>

## Theme 1: Women's Human Rights

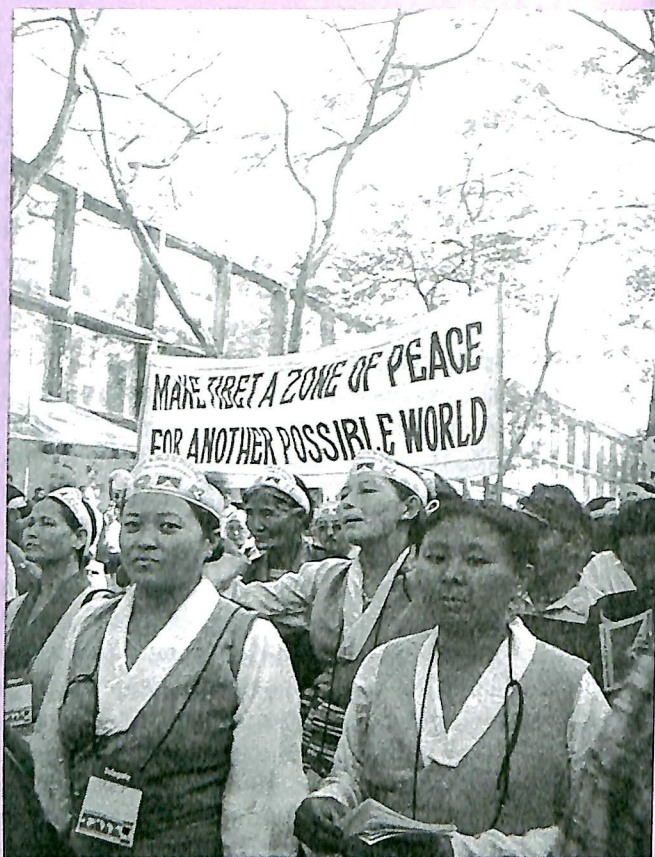
How does conceptualising discrimination and violence against women as human rights issues affect ground-level realities and struggles? What are the achievements and limitations of using the women's human rights framework in the context of globalisation and fundamentalism? What are the contradictions and imbalances within and between nation-states, as well as the United Nations? What are we doing to avoid the fragmentation of our work in defence of human rights? How do we hold both state as well as non-state actors accountable to women's rights? How are cultural, subjective differences on the basis of different life experiences of women incorporated in our strategies for demanding human rights or women's rights? How do we bring human rights to bear on transnational companies?

Human rights principles have historically been key to struggles for women's rights and a critical part of women's activism for justice in many parts of the world. However, international aid agencies and multilateral financing institutions have played a role in co-opting the language and principles of human rights. Globalisation and the rise of fundamentalism have also distorted this campaign. The human rights discourse has been unable to challenge these forces.

Within a neo-liberal, post-9/11 context where various forms of fundamentalisms have consolidated themselves, including those promoted by the U.S., human rights practice should be analysed in relation to the linkages between various political actors. The centrality of the state in any of our struggles, moreover, cannot be denied.

"Human rights" is about creating an environment where women can affirm the right to live with dignity. The collective struggle is as important as the individual struggle, but the human rights discourse lends itself to dichotomisation of individual rights vs. collective rights. No one human right is above another; all human rights have to be enjoyed simultaneously.

The need to conceptualise feminist strategies in relation to new challenges was underscored. The participants saw the need to examine the tensions between human rights discourse and neo-liberalism and how feminists have been working on the invisibility and interdependence of human rights in the context of their struggles. Participants also noted that many groups have been working on specific rights and specific



*"We believe this appeal is extremely relevant for the WSF to hear because achieving a zone of peace and non-violence on the Tibetan plateau should be a common struggle of the world." - Ms. Passang Dolma, Tibetan Women's Association (World Tibet Network News)*

themes that the women's movements need to incorporate into an integrated perspective and strategy.

## Theme 2: Reclaiming Women's Bodies

How do we as feminists reconcile tensions among ourselves with regard to different aspects of reproductive rights? How do we view the reproductive rights of adolescents and of people living with HIV/AIDS? What are the links and dissonances between reproductive rights and sexual rights?

The journey from maternal health to women's health to reproductive health to reproductive rights represents a rich and challenging process that feminists from the North and South have undergone. Although they have employed diverse approaches, these are united, however, against neo-Malthusian doctrines. Globalisation creates macroeconomic policies that undermine and erode the indispensable enabling environment for reproductive and sexual rights.



Unethical and coercive methods of promoting population control still persist, often promoted by agents of the state and local governments. Abortion rights, maternal health, motherhood rights, and social and economic rights are some of the prominent issues of our struggles. Social and economic rights are as important as one's personal right to "body integrity" in relation to reproduction, sexuality and health. In the context of global wars, armed conflicts and the ascendancy of extreme forms of nationalism and fundamentalism, the right to live is also being defined as part of the reproductive rights agenda.

### Theme 3: Affirming Sexual Rights

Nation-states have codified and responded to issues of sexual diversity, but how do these compare with gender definitions in other laws and customary practices? How do feminist perspectives confront the ideological underpinnings that valorise heterosexual marriage and monogamy? How can we problematise intersecting relations of power in our debates of sexual identity/rights in a way that leads to a broader understanding of issues of sexual politics? Why do we separate reproductive rights from that of sexual rights?

The control of female sexuality, restrictions and regulation of women's sexual choices and the pervasiveness of heteronormativity lie at the root of patriarchal structures. The interlinkages between patriarchal moral codes and religious precepts make for coercive, and often violent, imposition of sexual control over women and girls. Within feminist movements, there are contentious and divisive debates surrounding the varying forms of sexual practice and sexual preferences. The intimate nature of sexual practices and choices makes these a sensitive and difficult subject to discuss. Our silences and self-imposed prohibitions are part of the problem.

Sexuality is defined by a series of interconnected and varied patriarchal formulations and by factors such as the state, legal systems, cultural precepts, religion, globalisation and market forces. Feminist critiques of marriage, monogamy, family and compulsory heterosexuality have helped define our thoughts and actions in different geographical locations. Yet we are often silent on matters related to our bodies and our sexual lives or pleasure. The manifestations of the denial of women's sexual rights take a variety of different forms, depending on geographical, cultural and social contexts. The nexus between the state and religious institutions, even in democratic states, is undeniable.

### Theme 4: From the Local to the Global

What strategies challenge the rigid boundaries of the 'local vs. global'? How are the alliances at global and regional economic and trade forums informed by local realities like poverty and the depletion and privatisation of natural resources? How are local resistances strengthened or undermined by global linkages and solidarity? How can women activist groups maintain political autonomy while receiving financing and engaging with dominant institutions? What success have women's groups had in accessing funds while maintaining their own politics, agenda or work areas? What are our strategies in addressing issues and dilemmas related to funding from international organisations whose work, systems, and structures we criticise, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the regional development banks, and the United Nations? What should be the parameters of any dealings with the global private sector and transnational corporations that provide funding or other forms of support to NGOs such as Body Shop, Nike, and CISCO?

The local and global are often posited in opposition to each other. There have been many tensions regarding voice and accountability in political organising at different levels. Globalisation has made the local-global interconnections and dynamics more complex. The polarisation between the marginalised and the powerful has become more acute, yet the solidarity between global and local movements and resistances is also evidently growing. At the same time, social movements are also facing fragmentation in the face of growing challenges of globalisation. Indeed, globalisation is creating a need and paving the way for innovative and creative articulations of struggle and resistance.

With women joining the fundamentalist and right-wing political movements in massive numbers, women's movements must examine the impact of their political engagement. Feminist discussions should also take into account: power, intersectionality, diversity, alliances and inter-relations of individual, community and the nation-state.

Feminists need to build much stronger coalitions. Strategies for movement building at different levels are necessary as fragmentation across movements leads to the weakening of all. One such strategy is to ensure that the feminist agenda is heard and addressed by other civil society actors such as trade unions, peasant organisations and youth movements. Funding was another area identified for further examination. Some participants observed that funding or the process and strategies around fund sourcing have caused tensions among women's groups.